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A LEGEND OF TO-DAY

BY MARY T. EARLE.

Illustrated from photographs of Miss Jennie Goldthwaite.

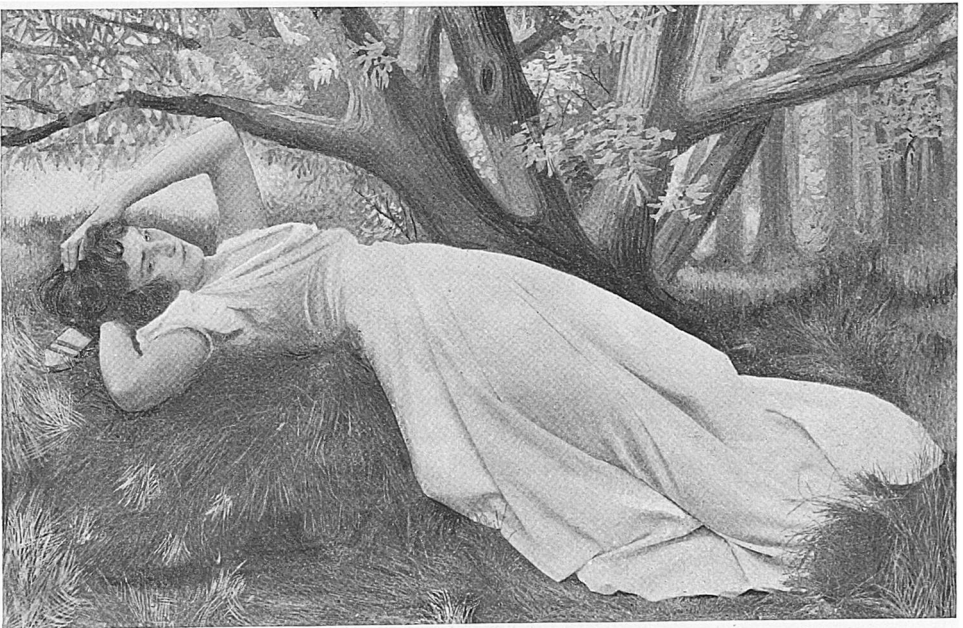
SOMETIME when all our questions are settled, when our realism and our romance are blended in tradition, a student of the future will turn over the thin tomes of mythology and modern fiction, and say, "How close these mortals followed in the footsteps of the gods."



"SHE WENT APART TO HEAR IT AND TO DREAM."

It happened once in a time of war that two sisters were left together in a wild, hilly borderland where many battles were fought. In their secluded valley they could not see the battles, but the booming of the guns reached them and they came to listen for it as for the voice of a companion. Vertile, the younger sister, pleased herself with fancies about it, and went apart to hear it and to dream. Sometimes she would lie for hours shaded by a spreading tree, wishing that she might take her toy-like sheath of arrows from under her head and go to find the battle. Then the older sister would come calling through the woods and lead her back to work and to play; but above their chatter she always felt the booming of the guns.

Vertile had heard of art and music and great houses where a few people amused many by playing



"SHE WOULD LIE FOR HOURS UNDER A SPREADING TREE."

at life and death and love, but she knew very little of these things, for she had grown to womanhood in the wartime, and everything but life, and death perhaps, was shut away from her by the armies. That was one reason why she wanted to get out where the guns were, they seemed to know all there was to know in the world. But her sister said that when you were near them the guns were fearful, though they did very well so far away; and she made Vertile promise that they would stay together and defend each other if soldiers from the armies came by, though she did not think even stragglers would find their valley.

One day as Vertile lay under her favorite tree, gazing up into the air, she heard a soft footstep near her, and, thinking her sister had come, she stretched up her round, white arms. But the hands that took her hands were strange, and they touched her in a new way. She felt that she understood more of all the things she had never known just by feeling that touch. Yet she drew her hands away and turned to find out who was there. It was a soldier from the armies. He was very tired of the battle, but it rested him to talk of it to someone who was glad to hear. So he told Vertile all about it; and then he found that it rested him still more to tell her how beautiful she was, because she had no idea of that at all, while she did have some rude notion of the war. But as she rested on her elbow and looked at him, she felt sure that she was not as beautiful as he. She thought he must be the greatest general in the armies, though he did not say so, and after he was gone she kept thinking over and over what he had said. It seemed but a moment till she heard footsteps again. When she saw it was not he she was startled, thinking one of the enemy had surprised her. But it was only her sister coming to find her. She had forgotten all about her sister.

It was very dull in the valley after that, and she had to do all sorts of things that did not interest her at all. Sometimes she was so impatient that her sister grew



"SHE FELT SURE SHE WAS NOT AS BEAUTIFUL AS HE."



"THINKING ONE OF THE ENEMY HAD SURPRISED HER."

angry ; she was sorry for that, but how could she help wishing to be left to think of what she had heard ? The sound of the guns troubled her, too, because she felt they meant peril for him ; and yet they called her, called her, called her, like an echo of his voice. He had told her that women came to the army sometimes to be near those they loved ; yet he had said she must not come on account of the danger. When it was all over he would come back to her. But the guns called her, and called her, and called her, till she knew she could have no peace if she stayed, so she stole away and went in the direction that they called. And the strange thing was that just as she was fainting with weariness she found him, and he lifted her up and carried her in his arms, so that in the midst of the battle she was joyously at peace. But she feared so to burden him that after a while she made him put her down to walk beside him ; and then the battle swept between them and she could not find him again, though she searched through all the dreadful tumult and the awful things there were to see. At last she was wounded and could only creep to one side and see the battle pass. She was too weak to follow after it, and there seemed nothing to do except to make her way back into the valley.

When she reached the valley she wanted to sink down and rest, but the sister who had always been so gentle was not sorry for her pain and weariness and wounds. She was only angry because Vertile had disobeyed and kept a secret and been hurt. So, without any rest or comfort, Vertile dragged her spent body away from the valley, and where the battle had passed she stretched herself in the trampled grass to wait for death.

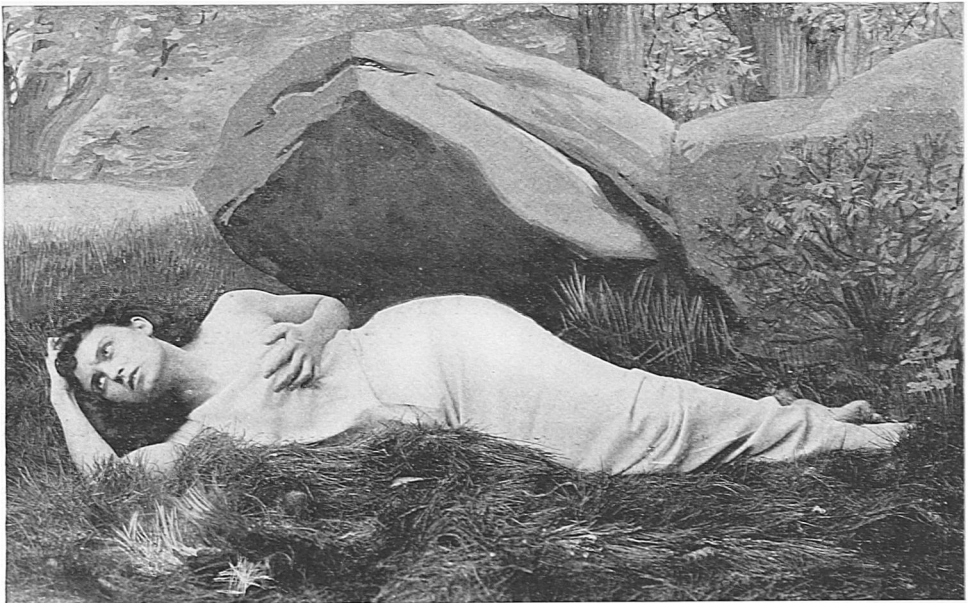
Instead of death sleep came and spun a fragile strand on which to thread more days of pain. She sought and sought through all that rugged borderland, but always as she followed the luring of the guns the battle moved aside and she was left alone. She might have perished from the weariness, but after many, many days a child nestled its soft weight against her aching heart. She saw that it had his eyes,

and its weakness gave her strength. She had never thought she could care for a child, but this child was so different, its touch was such a joy! She felt there was very little now which she did not know; she did not care to learn more. She was sure that she would find the soldier now, for it would be wrong if he did not see the child.

Poor little Vertile, whom the ancients called Callisto, whom we call by many names! There was much for her to know. Her sister had turned her away in scorn, but now, across the bloody fields where the battle had been, there came one who was taller, fairer, and more passionate than her sister. The fair woman was looking, looking everywhere among the rocks and trees, and Vertile knew that she was looking for the soldier. Vertile grasped the child to run, but the child cried out, and then the fair woman saw him with his eyes like the soldier's. She snatched him and threw him to the ground. She seized the mother by her long hair and dragged her along the loathsome field. Vertile gave one great cry that was not her own voice; but she did not struggle; she watched the hate in the fair woman's face, and she felt herself grow more and more loathsome in the bale of that hate until she lost all the semblance of youth and loveliness. When



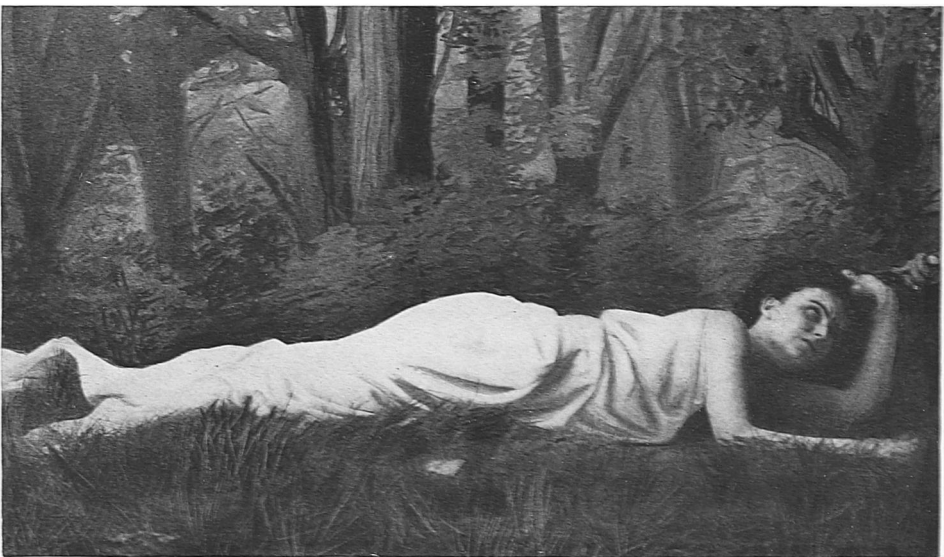
"BUT THE GUNS CALLED HER, AND CALLED HER,
AND CALLED HER."



"SHE STRETCHED HERSELF IN THE TRAMPLED GRASS TO WAIT FOR DEATH."

the fair woman dropped her she tried to rise, but could only shamle low over the ground.

But she could still remember ; so she went back along her trail, hunting for the child. It was long, long before she came to him ; she had been carried farther away than she knew. She who had feared nothing grew afraid. When the great battle roared in the distance and the guns called her as they had called her in the valley, she felt that all the battle was against her, and a terror of the strong armies seized her, and she would have run from them except that she must keep her face turned toward the child. She even longed to hide from the sun each morning as it rose, burning pure and merciless in the east, because it cast her shadow on the freshened grass ; but it was the sun that guided her back. At the sound of a crackling footstep she would have shrunk away in horror lest some creature that looked as she did should come near ; but she could not falter, for she knew that the child was stretching out his tiny hands to her and calling—at each step she could hear his wail. When she found him, he would creep close to her and nothing should ever tear them apart. He would see no change in her. She could feel the soft caressing touch of his wandering fingers. She choked with the thought that he might suffer before she reached him. She could not forget that he was a little, helpless thing that needed care ; and, changed as she was, she searched as she had never searched for the soldier. She did not know that years passed while she was searching. She did not know that the child was no longer helpless and weak. At last she saw a beautiful, strong boy roaming through the forest, with a bow and arrows. The boy looked at her with the soldier's eyes, and a flashing light came into them. By a supreme effort she lifted herself erect, and his arrow pierced her heart. But, as the shrill agony of her parting life cried out, she caught the boy in her arms and felt the rapture of his sudden tears upon her face. At last she knew all that she was to know of life and death and love. The old look came back to her, as a stillness more perfect than that of the valley gave her peace.



"SHE DID NOT STRUGGLE."